

## KONSTANTIN TSERETELI

(Tbilisi)

## About one Syriac Letter

In the 60–70ties of the 18th century the Syrians (Assyrians) living in the countries neighbouring to Georgia (Turkey, Iran, Iraq) tried to establish contacts with the Georgians overstepping the limits of confessional relations of a fairly long tradition. In particular, they repeatedly appealed to the Georgian king Irakli II for help and protection against Muslims. It should be also noted, that today there live on the territory of Georgia the Assyrians who resided in this country at different times. Evidently, the last significant immigration wave excluded, there exist among the “Georgian Assyrians” the descendants of the Assyrians who had migrated to Georgia far more earlier.

Documentary material supporting the early immigration of Assyrians to Georgia is lacking, but the correspondence of Irakli II and some of his written reports, sent to Russia, contain interesting information concerning the settlement of the Assyrians in Georgia.

The foreign policy archives of Russia contain the letters of the Syrian Church authorities to Irakli II, in which the above-mentioned request is expressed.<sup>1</sup> All these letters, written in Georgian and Syriac languages, have the postscripts of Irakli II with address of Georgian king to the count N. P a n i n. As seen from the Georgian letters, written to the Georgian king by the Syrian bishop Isaiah (Jesaya), the Assyrians asked the king for protection and promised to help him in the struggle against the Turks. Irakli supported the Assyrians and asked the count N. P a n i n to take into account their request, since “[...] they and Christians of this region would join us and we and Christians, in general, would gain great might

<sup>1</sup> A. Tsagareli, *Deeds and other historical documents concerning Georgia*, vol. II, fasc. 1, St.-Petersburg 1898. (In Russian).





The letter is written in the Syriac (Nestorian) script, which was used by followers of the East Syrian Church — the Nestorians. At the end of the letter there is a stamp belonging to Patriarch Simon (“Patriarch of the East Mar-Shimun”).

As is well-known, in the 5th century the Syrian Church broke down into two parts: the West Syrian Church, which covered Syria and Lebanon, and the East Syrian Church, which settled down in North Mesopotamia and Iran. The followers of the West Syrian Church recognized monophysitism and are known in the history of the Syrian Church as “Jacobites” (ܝܫܘܥܝܬܐ); the East Syrian Church preached Nestorianism and its followers were known as “Nestorians” (ܢܝܫܘܪܝܐ). In the 16th cent. (from 1551) one part of Nestorians formed a separate group and elected their Patriarch (the so-called Uniat-Nestorians). They are known as “Chaldeans”; and even today they call themselves so (ܟܠܕܝܐܝܬܐ), while under the name of “Nestorians” only non-united Nestorians are known.<sup>4</sup>

From the 16th century on all patriarchs (like catholicos) heading nonunited Nestorians bear the name of Mar-Shimun (Simon).<sup>5</sup> The same person bears the title of “Patriarch of the East”. In 1770, Mar-Shimun XIV was in Qudshanis (Quchanis) on the eastern coast of the Big Zab river in Kurdistan mountains (Turkey).<sup>6</sup> At the same time there is also the second residence of the Nestorian Patriarchate in Alqosh (40 kms from Mosul toward North Iraq).<sup>7</sup>

The letter was addressed to the Bishop-Metropolitan Mar-Ishoyaw, who was mentioned at the beginning of the letter.

Mar-Ishoyaw is the name wide-spread among the heads of the Nestorian Church. (The word has a Syrian etymology and means — “Jesus gave”). The letter of Mar-Ishoyaw might be addressed to the nephew (brother’s son) of the Chaldean Church head Mar-Elias XII (by some evidence, brother’s grandchild) who, at the time concerned, was in Alqosh and had a title of Metropolitan. (Alqosh was also the place of the residence of Chaldean Patriarch Mar-Elias XII).<sup>8</sup> Later, in 1778–1804, after the death of Elias XII, he headed the above-mentioned Patriarchate under the name of Elias XIII (known as Elias XIII Mar-Ishoyaw).<sup>9</sup>

Obviously, at that time (the second half of the 18th cent.) a tense situation existed between these two patriarchates, and both sides wanted to decrease it,

<sup>4</sup> B. Spuler, *Die nestorianische Kirche* in: *Handbuch der Orientalistik*, I Abt., B. I/2. Leiden 1961, S. 163–164. Aziz S. Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity*. London 1968, pp. 278, 279.

<sup>5</sup> V. V. Bolotov, *From the history of Syrian-Persian Church*. St.-Petersburg 1901, p. 58. (In Russian).

<sup>6</sup> Spuler, *ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>7</sup> J. M. Fiey, *Assyrie chrétienne*, Vol. II, Beyrouth 1965, p. 390.

<sup>8</sup> Bolotov, *ibid.*, pp. 58, 65. Cf. Fiey, *ibid.*, p. 365, n. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Spuler, *ibid.*, p. 164.

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since just at that time the struggle between Syrians and Moslems aggravated.<sup>10</sup> Just this fact enabled Patriarch Mar-Shimun to send the letter to Metropolitan Mar-Ishoyaw, which must have been the answer to the appeal of the head of the Chaldeans. The Syriac letter is not dated, but according to the postscript of Irakli II it must be the same 1770, when Irakli received it. At that time Metropolitan Mar-Ishoyaw, as a successor of a patriarch throne, was an influential person. By that time Patriarch Elias XII must have been rather old, if one takes into account, that he came to the patriarch throne in 1722. There, in Alqosh, where Elias XII lived, there was with him his nephew and successor, who took the patriarch throne and got the name of Elias XIII after death of Elias XII in 1778.<sup>11</sup> At that time Metropolitan Mar-Ishoyaw headed the Patriarchate and sent an official correspondence on behalf of Patriarchate. That is why Mar-Shimun sends the letter to him and calls him "brother".

It should be mentioned that under Elias XII, namely in 1779, the Chaldeans refused the authority of the Roman Church and returned to old Nestorianism.<sup>12</sup> (Though this return was not for a long time). Thus, from 1779, the Nestorians had two patriarchs: Mar-Shimun XIV and Mar-Elias XIII. After the death of Mar-Elias XIII (1804) the most part of his parish rejoined the Roman Church and united with the patriarchate, which had been once separated from it. This Patriarchate was headed by a new branch of patriarchs, founded by Metropolitan of Diyarbakir Joseph, who had the name "Mar-Joseph".<sup>13</sup>

This letter is an interesting document for the study of relations between two Nestorian patriarchates. Evidently, it represents the appeal of Nestorians to the Chaldeans separated from them, to return to the old faith, as it had been before. Only from the viewpoint of these relations the understanding of the whole text is possible. The fact, that this correspondence had a definite positive consequence, is also verified by the return of the Chaldeans to Nestorianism by Mar-Ishoyaw.

Bishop Isaiah, mentioned in the postscript of the Syriac letter as an addressee of the letter, is not mentioned anywhere in this letter (either as an addressee, or as a sender). Therefore the postscript of Irakli II in the letter of Mar-Shimun, who was not an addressee of this letter at all (it is also evident from the postscript of the Georgian king), is unclear. Irakli might have received this letter by mistake instead of an other Syriac letter. Otherwise the fast of sending of this letter to Irakli II has only one explanation: the heads of the Syrian Church wanted to inform the Georgian king, to whom they appealed for protection and help, about

<sup>10</sup> During one of these battles the leader of the Syrians, a local feudal, Malik Melchizedek II of Jilu was killed. (R. Macuch, *Geschichte der spät- und neusyrischen Literatur*, Berlin 1976, p. 8).

<sup>11</sup> From the 16th cent. the title of patriarch among Nestorians is inherited, and as a rule, the successor is a nephew (both in paternal and maternal line).

<sup>12</sup> Spuler, *ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>13</sup> Atiya, *ibid.*, p. 279. Bolotov, *ibid.*, pp. 58, 67.

“their problems”. In fact, the author (Patriarch Mar-Shimun XIV) of the letter, which is a reply to the letter of Mar-Ishoyaw, offers to meet the addressee in order to make friends again, as it used to be earlier with their forefathers.

The letter is of certain interest from the viewpoint of the history of the East Syrian Church and the Syrians, living in North Mesopotamia and Iran, since at that time Nestorian patriarchs were not only spiritual but also secular leaders of the Syrians.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Atiya, *ibid.*, p. 289.

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